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Troping the Asylum

Toronto's asylum doctors looked and gazed, but they also read and wrote. Their texts demonstrate, among other things, the persistent and even obsessive textuality of medical authority, even as they themselves protested -- too much -- that it was based on something more. These texts parallel, are affected by but also help to facilitate developments in the history of alienism and early psychiatry, from the failure of "moral therapy," through the depressing period of "custodial care," to the beginnings of clinical psychiatry, the "discovery" of dementia praecox, and the "Mental Hygiene" movement of the 1920s.

These texts describe a kind of North American "birth of the clinic," not the austere Foucauldian clinic of the 19th-century, but something related to it in its capacity to generate, however crudely but viciously, the knowledge that not only enhances its power but also disseminates it. Of this phenomenon it is appropriate to ask, as Foucault does of the 18th-century clinic, whether one can rightfully "transform into an object of clinical observation a patient whose poverty has compelled him to seek assistance" (83), or whether it is not "a tacit form of violence ... upon a sick body that demands to be comforted, not displayed" (84).[iv] The latter question dogs not only C.K. Clarke's vociferations in the name of the Asylum on behalf of the clinic, but also the rhetoric of his predecessors, George Hamilton Park, Daniel Clark, and above all, of Joseph Workman, Clarke's mentor as well as predecessor. In their various arguments, in pamphlets, articles, and annual reports these doctors continually display the bodies of the sick, to no good effect. Ironically, instead of the "dense and wealthy population of a metropolitan city," which the original commissioners anticipated in the 1840s would mean a steady supply of students, an ever-growing population of urban poor supply it with variously depicted "plagues" of masturbators, monomaniacs, erotomaniacs, paretics, degenerates, schizophrenics, defective immigrants, low to high-grade morons, and feeble-minded women. The doctors play fast and loose not only with these diseases but also with the poor who seem to be especially vulnerable to them, and whose diseases it is difficult if not impossible to distinguish from poverty. The diseases vary with the role of the Asylum in professional imagination, but their epidemic and endemic character remains constant.

Beginning in the 1960s historians such as Erving Goffman, Gerald Grob, David Rothman, Ellen Dwyer, Constance McGovern, Roy Porter, and Andrew

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givejedahand #CAMH is #CAMHFoundation is #MediaConstructed #Dentsu #DENTSUBOS #MentalIllness is #Anti #Mad #mentalhealth #Fascim is #Stigmatizing your - my! - #wayoflife as a #brain #disease is little #Nazis running around in #purple #tshirts calling themselves #changragents without any #insight and face it even #livedexperience cannot help you if you're #stupid #queenwest #westqueenwest recognize it?! #History #Asylums #Hosspitals #History #Workman #MadPride?! Originally accepted by Roy Porter for History of #Psychiatry #UK then withdrawn after a bitter quarrel, this is the best part of the book.

JULY 26, 2016